How a Swedish Video Game Company Accidentally Molded the American Right

A history on grand strategy games and far right radicalism, coming from an actual grand strategy gamer.

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In case you haven't heard, Pete Hegseth has a lot of tattoos.

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The first thing to say about them is that they look hideous. The second is that t are concerning, if only because of how many of them relate to a certain theme: Crusades. Not some metaphorical crusade, mind you—the actual ones. Pete Hegseth, our Secretary of Defense, has covered his body with symbols from the actual armed conflicts that took place nearly 1000 years ago. There is, of course that large Jerusalem cross—the literal coat of arms of the ill-fated Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem—placed prominently on his upper chest. From there, on can move down to his lower arm to see a cross with a sword. That's a reference Matthew 10:34, a Bible verse that modern Christian nationalists use as justification for religious violence. And right next to it, there are the two Latin words emblazoned on his bicep: "Deus Vult," or "God wills it."

Despite the fierce competition, that "Deus Vult" tattoo proved to be the most controversial of the symbols that Hegseth had stamped upon himself after he w nominated to serve as Secretary of Defense in November 2024. As many outlets quickly noted, the phrase had been widely used by white supremacist mass shooters and neo-Nazi during the 2010s. This made the nominee's attachment t quite concerning, even for those beyond the reaches of the so-called liberal me But, as one might expect, all of the furor passed without any consequence. Duri his nomination hearings, Hegseth was questioned about the tattoos, defended them, and said that the scrutiny was a case of "anti-Christian bigotry." Then he was confirmed to run the Pentagon and liberals gave up on the topic. Even whe they train their fire on him today, they almost always go after the easiest target like his drunkenness and general incompetence.

Why have they punted on the tattoos? Perhaps they assume that Hegseth simpl has enough plausible deniability to claim that whatever symbol they say is an ic of racial hatred is actually a simple expression of faith that dates back centuries That may very well be the case with the Jerusalem cross, which is used as the fl of the country of Georgia to this day. It may even be true for Matthew 10:34, wh has been referenced by preachers for thousands of years in countless different contexts. As for "Deus Vult," however, things are a little more complicated. Aft it was used as a rallying cry during the era of the Crusades, the phrase complet fell off the map. For hundreds and hundreds of years, nobody ever used it—not church, not religious traditionalists, not even outright neo-medievalists during periods of renewed interest in the era. This only changed when it was suddenly revived as a white nationalist symbol in the 2010s.

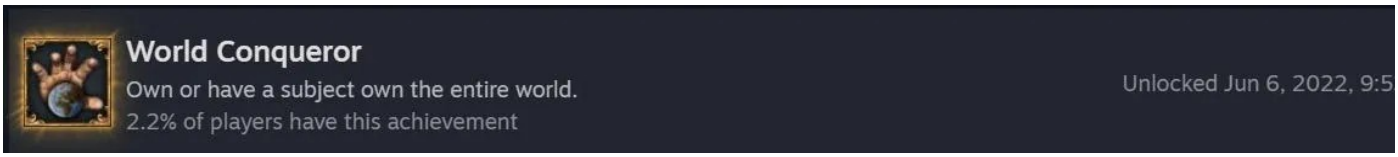
Specifically after the year 2012.

Or, to be even more specific, after the Swedish video game company Paradox Interactive published *Crusader Kings II*, a grand strategy game set in the Middle Ages that used the phrase extensively.

You probably have a certain idea of how the rest of this article is going to go. A giving you an anecdote that connects the topic of Paradox games to something that's a) concerning, b) topical and c) related to the Trump administration, I, as left-wing political writer, will now go on to give a description of Paradox games that is as minimally informative and maximally fear-inducing as possible. With inelegance that immediately tells Paradox gamers that I have never played any the titles, I will give a rough, largely incorrect, and hostile overview of grand strategy gaming that presents the entire genre as nothing more than a digital radicalization factory that turns impressionable young people into fascists. It's

as if I will have a lack of material to work with—not when the company's most popular title is a World War II simulator that lets you literally play as Hitler. I v then close with some vague handwaving about how fucked up the internet is, imply that the games shouldn't exist, and then go about my day having provide absolutely no useful information to anyone anywhere.

I am not going to do this, and it is because I have a confession to make: I love Paradox games. I have played them ever since I was in middle school and I still play them to this day. For a span of roughly five years, they were practically the only video games I played on my computer. I'm also—dare I say—pretty good a them.



My greatest personal accomplishment prior to the 2022 midterms

While I have more than my fair share of my issues with the games, I really do li them a lot, and I do not regard them as far-right schemes meant to drive young people to love Hitler and hate Muslims. That sort of framing may be easy, but i wrong, and it says nothing about what the popularity of these games among politically-inclined young people actually means. Instead, I am going to look at things from a different angle. In this article, I will cover what happened *after* young politics obsessives—specifically young politics obsessives on the right—picked these games and joined their communities over the course of the 2010s. This is because understanding the design choices made by Paradox Interactive during this period is the skeleton key to understanding why young right-winge today are so utterly bizarre. Between their obsession with war to their unprecedentedly favorable views towards state power, almost every element of their fascistic worldview can be traced back to video game mechanics designed

well-meaning Swedish liberals responding to technical limitations and market pressures.

I'm serious. This isn't an exaggeration. It's where we are now, and it's where yo expect us to be now that video games are bigger than movies and music combir So, without further ado, here's the first look anyone has ever given at the bigge political influence on the next generation of Republican staffers and politicians why they were designed the way they were, and how larger budgets and improv processing power might also change the world by giving us a new generation o historical materialist gamers.

The first thing to understand when looking at the history of Paradox games is a simple fact: modeling an entire era of history on a computer is very hard. It is h today, it was hard ten years ago, and it was especially hard when the company began. It was so hard, in fact, that hardly anyone was interested in trying. Whil there had been major markets for both history-based games and strategy game since the very beginning of PC gaming, the first attempts to combine the two never even attempted to structure them as historical simulators. The most noteworthy and commercially successful early example of the genre—the *Civilization* series—abstracted things as much as one possibly could. *Civilizatio* simplified history into broad eras, provided identical starting points for its nations, and was set on a randomly generated, tile-based map. Although massiv popular and engaging in its own right, this series never even attempted to be a historical sandbox. If someone back then wanted to play a "country simulator," their only real option would have been to purchase a dedicated tabletop game, which were often arcane, hard to find, and only truly playable for people lucky enough to have friends as interested in the topic as they were.

Such was the world from which the entity we now know as Paradox Interactive emerged from in the 1990s. Their story begins with a Swedish tabletop compan

by the name Target, which in the late '90s was trying to find ways to capitalize of the surprising success of its 1996 board game *Svea Rike*. A revolutionary title that aimed to re-create the history of the Swedish Kingdom over 300 years of re life history, *Svea Rike* somehow succeeded in becoming one of the most popular games in all of Sweden, which was probably the only place on Earth with peopl special enough to give such a game mass support. Target's big idea was to conv the title into a video game, which they put out in 1997. That game also succeed financially, even as it eschewed abstracting things in the way *Civilization* did. T sequels—*Svea Rike II* and *Europa Universalis: Crown of the North* (not to be confus with the later *Europa Universalis* series)—soon followed, and they did well enou for Target's video game division to survive even after the company at large filed for bankruptcy in 1999.

Now reconfigured as Paradox Entertainment, the fledgling band of developers responsible for creating arguably the first modern grand strategy game in histo chose to double down on the approach that had allowed them to stay afloat in their tough, niche market. In 2000, they repeated the *Svea Rike* strategy by converting another European board game—this time France's *Europa Universali* into an online title that kept its focus on real-life history. It, too, was successful and it allowed Paradox Entertainment to start publishing its own wholly uniqu IPs that weren't based on pre-existing board games. In 2002, there was *Hearts o Iron*, a World War II simulator that brought the company out of the early mode era for the first time. 2003 saw *Victoria: An Empire Under the Sun*, an attempt to portray the Victorian era that was perhaps most notable as the team's first atte to center gameplay more around internal country management than external conflict. And in 2004, there was *Crusader Kings*, a game set in the middle ages th put players in the shoes of familial dynasties instead of abstract nation-states. A of these titles would grow to become franchises in their own right, and togethe they still stand as Paradox's Big Four historical grand strategy titles to this day.

While the company has experimented at starting franchises covering other eras real-world history over the years, none have found the sustained success of thes four, all of which still receive active support by means of their sequels right nov

But this early success and expansion did not come without its own set of problems. As one might expect from people who were willing to work in an industry as niche and precarious as tabletop gaming, the developers making the games were primarily motivated by passion and their own personal gaming preferences—not necessarily profit. But those who ran the business side of thir at Paradox Entertainment did not view things remotely the same way. While th appreciated the sudden influx of capital that came from the unexpected success their developers' passion projects, they did not see this as a reason to continue investing in their vision. Instead, they saw the cash as an opportunity to becom traditional entertainment company that produced triple-A games and other for of content based on big-name IPs.

After spending significant resources developing a free-to-play first person shoc MMO that never ended up seeing the light of day, the suits at Paradox Entertainment decided to stake their future on buying the rights to Conan the Barbarian, who they sought to make the centerpiece of new games and movies. When a business consultant named Fredrik Wester told them that this would n work and that their best bet in the gaming world would be to keep on developir their already successful strategy titles, the executives decided that they would b better off just selling their entire gaming division as it existed and moving forward with their big IPs. Wester, for his part, saw this as an opportunity that could not pass up. As soon as the opportunity became available, he himself bou out Paradox Entertainment's gaming division, the rights to all of their grand strategy titles, and the employment contracts of the staff members who had developed them. With these assets and employees, Wester founded Paradox

Interactive, a new company with himself as CEO.

From the very start, Paradox Interactive and its employees placed a great deal o pride in seeing themselves as a different kind of firm—one that eschewed the lowbrow tactics of the profit-obsessed mass market and did something differen and purer. Per Shams Jorjani, the company's so-called "Manager of the Unicorr Division," in a 2013 interview with *Eurogamer*:

> "We want games that have a high average play time. We like people to be abl to spend hundreds of hours playing, if not thousands. We want the game to have a lot of replayability and we want the game to have a hardcore compone to it. The term 'hardcore' almost means nothing today, because people woulc describe *Call of Duty* as a hardcore game, but basically we call it smart games for smart gamers. We want something that challenges the player who, in turi demands a lot from the game."

Relative to Paradox Entertainment and its dream of being a Conan the Barbaria content mill, Paradox Interactive seemed to live up to this lofty, elitist view of itself as a rare home for quality content in an era of slop in its first years. Over t course of the 2000s, they started pushing out sequels for their core history-base franchises and began finding that deeply engaged core audience along the way. But it didn't take long for that player-friendly mask to finally slip off. While Paradox Interactive may have been deeply committed to being a game company their way, they were still very much a video game company, which meant that tl were still in the business of making money. Their vision of appealing to a dedicated core base, however noble, also had a cynical financial motive: getting that same group of players to give them money over and over again for the sam game through the release of DLC. It was innovative, it was highly lucrative, anc

formed the basis of the company's design philosophy in their early years. Rathe than try to make their games appeal to a wide audience, Paradox would try to make their games as addictive as possible. Its ideal consumer was an enthusias who would revolve their entire life around their titles, not someone seeking a multiplayer social outlet or some idle fun after school or work.

With this business model in mind, Paradox started prioritizing innovation. As computer power increased in the late 2000s and early 2010s, their games startec becoming more and more complex, developing into mediums greater and granc than simple ports of tabletop games. In 2009, they released *Hearts of Iron III*, the third installation of their World War II series that still contains the most compl military system they have ever created. One year later in 2010, they revealed the fullest extent of their ambitions with *Victoria II*, which stands to this day as eas the most ambitious game Paradox has ever made with the technology available them. Advancing far, far beyond their previous approach of depicting the world a combination of abstract state-entities controlling pieces of land, *Victoria II* bu its entire world around a simulation of the entire world population, or "pops."

To say that this was just an advancement or ahead of its time would be an understatement. No game published anywhere by anyone had attempted to do with *Victoria II* did, and no other game would for more than a decade after its release. With a start date in 1836 and an end date in 1936, the game sought to simulate everything from the industrial revolution to global imperialism to Wo War I as granularly as possible. At the heart of everything was an economics system that sought to model the entire 19th century global economy—including all of its massive changes—with actual people at its core. Every single pop in th game had its own occupation, culture, religion, education level, political ideolo political orientation, and material satisfaction level. They produced all of the goods and resources in the game and provided the demand that set their prices

those goods and resources in both global and regional markets. Their political leanings—not necessarily your desires as the player—determined what laws yo could pass and what system of government you could sustain. While one could engage in kind of the warfare and imperial expansion that had been the ultimat ends in past grand strategy games, the story of any given *Victoria II* run was fundamentally about the people of your country: how they grew and changed ov the course of the long 19th century, and how you, the player, worked around bo their strengths and limitations.

With this title, the artistic intentions of Paradox Interactive became clear. Thei ideal game was never going to be a more historically grounded version of *Civilization*, with deeply abstracted, game-y mechanics simply applied to real-li boundaries and geography. They wanted to create a truly faithful model of hum history and development, complete with all of the social dynamics that created world as we know it. They wanted to make the Ultimate Grand Strategy Game.

Now, did *Victoria II* succeed at this? Absolutely not. The game was a mess, ridd with bugs and fundamentally incapable of sustaining its own weight. That ultra complex world economy system was so obtusely designed that the developers w forced to remove interest from loans as a mechanic to keep the world from running out of money every game. Yet the game was beloved by players anyway only because it was clear that it was only the first step towards Paradox's ultima end goal—one that the company took without necessarily prioritizing the most money as possible.

Case in point: Wester, still the company's CEO, was so convinced that the title would fail to make a profit that he said he would shave his head in public if it e broke even. But he still greenlit it anyways, as the company's ceiling seemed lo enough that there appeared to be no point to dumb it down to target a mass audience. While it would obviously be ideal if they could combine their DLC-

based recurring revenue model with a large playerbase, that didn't seem to be i the cards, so the company was fine to just keep on doing what they wanted and making games that they themselves were interested in first and foremost.

Then *Crusader Kings II* happened.

Looking back in retrospect, it's obvious that the very unique approach that Paradox Interactive took towards their games in the late 2000s and early 2010s wasn't going to last forever. They had reached close to the limits of existing technology with *Hearts of Iron III* and *Victoria II*, to the point where even the company's ultra-dedicated fans started pushing back. There was particular ang over the fact that *Hearts of Iron III*—which was, by that point, the company's m successful game ever—was all but impossible to mod for, which likely led the company to contract out a remaster of the far older *Hearts of Iron II* in 2011. Tha game, known as *Darkest Hour*, was incredibly well-received by the company's m dedicated fans, showing that bigger wasn't always better even in terms of appealing to out-and-out history obsessives.

2011 was also notable as the year that Paradox saw its first mainstream success means of *Magicka*, an action-adventure title created by eight university student that the company bought up after it won a local game awards contest. It went o to sell over a million copies, increased the company's profits by a staggering 25 and gave the suits their first taste at how profitable their "long tail" recurring-revenue DLC model could be when applied at a mass scale. All of these varying factors and incentives—to say nothing of the fact that the technology and capit just wasn't there yet for the kinds of games they wanted to make—would have undoubtedly led the company in the direction of simplification to at least some degree, something made evident by the fact that the development of the game t

would become one of their most notoriously "dumbed down" titles began arour this time.

But even if this trend towards simplification may have already been in the work it was *Crusader Kings II* and its success that took it, intensified it, and made it fundamental to the company's approach for a full decade. This was also all in sp of the game *not* being an attempt by Paradox to dumb things down or shameles appeal to more casual gamers by any real stretch. Just like *Victoria II*, the meat *Crusader Kings II* was in its systems of internal management, whether that be within one's polity or one's dynasty. Nothing about how the game presented countries was intuitive to either our modern understanding of nation-states or how past strategy games had depicted the entities players control. Yet in spite all of this, the game was a major breakout success. As it turned out, those hype dedicated gamers that Paradox had been targeting over the past decade include lot of game journalists, and those journalists wasted no time to declare to their audience that *Game of Thrones: The Video Game* had finally been released (it also helped that there was an actual *Game of Thrones* mod, too). By the end of the yea it had been nominated for Game of the Year by several major publications and given high praise in many others.

It also had a secret weapon that none of Paradox's other titles had: sex. As a gar fundamentally based around families, reproduction was an essential part of *Crusader Kings II*'s gameplay, and its liberal developers put in practically no guardrails as for who you could go out and make love with in the game. You cou fuck your boss. You could fuck your army commanders. You could fuck the Pop *as a man*. You could even fuck a horse if you knew how to abuse the mechanics enough. Users on the early 2010s internet couldn't get enough of this stuff, especially when they resulted in forum posts with titles like "My elderly male k was impregnated by his gay lover" and "sexuel (sic) intercourse at an older age i

dangerous." Suddenly, a title that Paradox had initially written off as yet anothe passion project had become a massive hit, with more than a million copies sold 2014.

Everything about grand strategy gaming changed after this. Before *Crusader Kir II*, the entire genre was regarded as doomed to be perpetually niche even by the company that effectively owned it. Afterwards, it was clear that the games had potential to have a real mass appeal among gamers and make a lot of money in process. Central to this extraordinary financial promise was the fact that Paradox's new fans wound up being just as invested in the company's games as their old ones. Even as *Crusader Kings II*'s user base shot into the millions, the average total playtime per player was around 100 hours, a stunning number for such a large playerbase. The suits at Paradox clearly recognized this and quickl began shoveling out as much DLC as they humanly could. As the game's popularity grew, they put access to everything from ethnically accurate Turkish faces to the entire Indian subcontinent behind a paywall. It was scummy, low-r and deeply anti-player, and it worked. By the time that the *Crusader Kings II* bas game reached a million copies sold, its full catalog of DLC and expansions had already reached seven million sales, a staggering haul given the relatively minir effort that was put into each new installment and how prohibitively expensive i eventually became to purchase the full game.

It was at this point, and at this scale, that Paradox Interactive and its design choices became very politically relevant. For a great many of their new players– particularly those in the United States—the first time they would pick up a Paradox game would represent the first time they had ever been exposed to the time periods the games covered. The things Paradox chose to focus on, represe and center in their gameplay formed the basis of their understanding of how th world worked for large swaths of history—and, by extension, how it still works

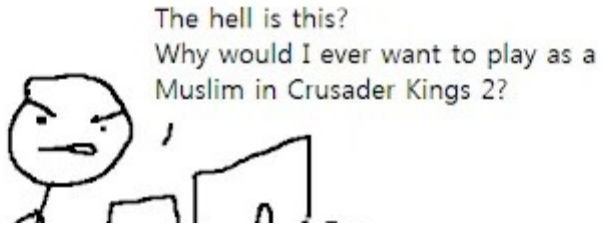
today. And in *Crusader Kings II*, they received a very simple message: that the entire world turned on religious conflict. As the title of the game implied, the main event of every run were so-called Great Holy Wars, where all of the rulers major faiths would team up to try and take over a large landmass controlled by opposing religious group. These faith-based conflicts were what all of that internal realm management and character-driven drama that defined most of th gameplay of *Crusader Kings II* added up to. Success at uniting one's realm only rewarded the player with more money, which could only really be used to hire more and better troops, which just allowed the player to embark on more religi wars, whether they be those Great Holy Wars or—in most cases—grabs for big chunks of land against local heathens. To do anything else, whether that entaile expanding within one's own religious group or simply focusing on internal development within one's own borders, was to play so suboptimally that it coul only be justified by roleplaying.

You can probably tell where all of this ended up going. While Paradox theoretically presented their players with infinite ways to play and, eventually, a wide range of religions and cultures to play as, the average *Crusader Kings II* gar went the same way: playing as a European Christian ruler and killing a lot of Muslim Arabs. This wasn't just because Europe received the most attention, ha the most content built around it, or provided the structures around which the r of the game was designed. It was also because, for many players, Europe was th *only place they were allowed to play*. In a stark contrast to how things work in rea life, Paradox locked the ability to be Muslim in their game behind a paywall, qu literally forcing players to only play as Christians unless they were willing to fo over another $10. They then proceeded to do the exact same for all non-Christi religions over the years, from Norse paganism to Judaism to Hinduism.

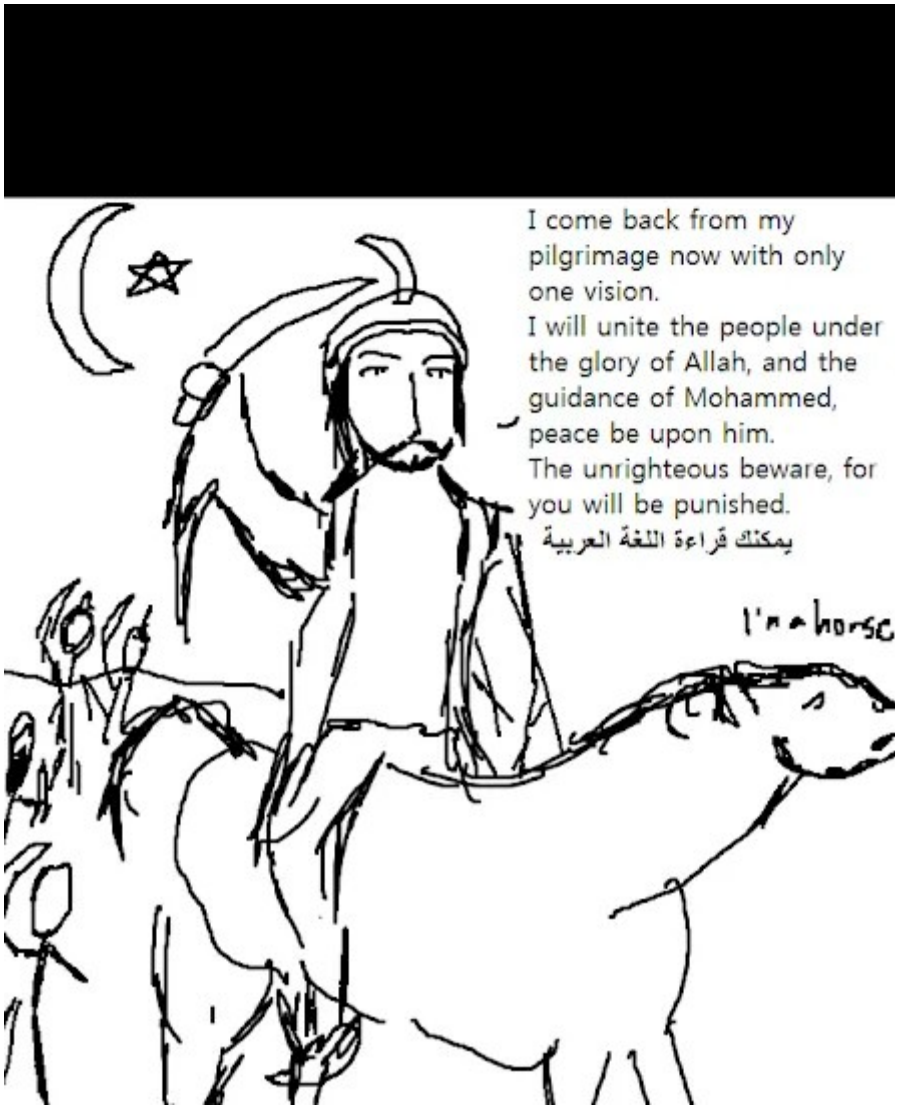
It was with this choice that any and all efforts the developers made to make the

game a faithful depiction of the larger medieval world—and they really did try–were rendered dead on arrival. With everything outside of the Christian world literally blocked off for the vast majority of the playerbase, the game's budding online fandom was left to find community in their common experience of playi as Christians and killing lots of Muslims. Unsurprisingly, these communities quickly became deeply influenced by white supremacists, who came into the game's subreddits and message boards with an extensive pre-existing memetic language for the popular topics of hating and killing Muslims. And as they joke their way into bringing references to the Bosnian genocide into mainstream meme culture, they themselves started to become deeply influenced by the gam which began to play an ever-more-important social role in their own communities. The aforementioned post-2012 popularity of "Deus Vult" after centuries of obscurity tells the whole story here. As it turned out, the supposed defenders of the West were influenced far more by computer games than the actual traditions of the institutions they said they were dedicating their lives to

Does this mean that everyone who played *Crusader Kings II* or engaged in the community had accidentally put themselves on the track to becoming Richard Spencer? Of course not. While the nature of the gameplay undoubtedly nudged players towards a hostile, conflict-driven view of the world, some were intellige enough to admit it and even make fun of how wildly their attitudes swung between each playthrough. A popular meme posted after Paradox made Muslin playable shows that many in the community were at least somewhat self-aware about the influence that these computer games had on their attitudes about the world:



Christ, I mean, I'll buy it anyway since it's Crusader Kings 2, but I just want a medieval European experience
I'll just play as a Muslim and get it over with. God damn it, I hate Arabs
2 hours later


I come back from my pilgrimage now with only one vision.
I will unite the people under the glory of Allah, and the guidance of Mohammed, peace be upon him.
The unrighteous beware, for you will be punished.
يمكنك قراءة اللغة العربية
I'm a horse

It's quite open-minded for a meme where "God damn it, I hate Arabs" is preser as a relatable opinion.

If *Crusader Kings II* was grand strategy's first real success, *Europa Universalis IV* the moment when the genre officially arrived. For as stunningly successful as Paradox's depiction of the middle ages had been commercially, it was always possible for one to claim that its popularity had been a fluke. For one, it had be released right at the start of the *Game of Thrones* TV series—a high point of American interest in feudalistic drama. It also was focused on individuals, not countries, arguably making it more like *The Sims* than any of Paradox's other tit

Even the focus on the Crusades could have been said to make it especially appealing to the seedier parts of post-9/11 America. *Europa Universalis IV* had n of this. From its early modern setting to the way in which one played as an abstract state—not an individual character—it was a true-blue grand strategy game, only capable of succeeding on the genre's own terms. And it was also Paradox's flagship franchise, which made the company very invested in seeing i succeed in a way that none of their titles had ever done before.

What followed was something that the company quite notably did not do in *Crusader Kings II*: a very deliberate dumbing down of gameplay in the name of finding a wider audience. Only a few years after they had pushed internal mechanics to their limit in *Victoria II*, Paradox Interactive completely and utter gave up on simulating any kind of domestic politics in *Europa Universalis IV*. Th were no pops of any kind. No attempt was made to simulate a global or domest economy. Even the prices of trade goods were fixed, only ever changing in response to scripted events. As the player, nearly every single decision you mad involved spending one of three abstract points—pejoratively called "mana"—th you earned largely based on the randomly generated skills of your leaders. This made things far more intuitive, but it also meant that the game wasn't even attempting to simulate a real world of any kind.

All of this presented a very particular view of history to its players. In the world early *Europa Universalis IV*, internal divisions within countries don't just not matter. They effectively do not exist. Instead, every country on planet Earth exi as a single-minded entity, with not a single person with any goals greater or different than the interests of the state. All conflict is between different countr cultures and religions. To the extent that any one country is meaningfully diffe from any other, it is only because of the modifiers given from a set of pre-determined "national ideas" that are always the same no matter what actually

happens over the course of the game. In every single game, the French will alwa get a boost to army morale, the Dutch will always get a boost to trade income, a the British will always have stronger ships. No decisions anyone makes can influence the very essence of these cultures. They just simply *are*, and they are a that distinguish Political Entity A from Political Entity B.

The end result of all of this was not a bad or shallow video game. I personally played *Europa Universalis IV* on and off for nearly a full decade, and I still learne something new about it every time I picked it up. The fact that I only complete my first world conquest in the game in 2022, a full eight years after I started playing it for the first time, should tell you all you need to know about its replayability and depth. But it was *not* the ideal grand strategy game that Parad showed their desire to create when they released *Victoria II*. It wasn't even a ste in that direction. It was a conservative game, and it presented a conservative vi of history, where historical outcomes were determined by a combination of stat cultural attributes and the aptitude of individual great men of history.

It also sold a lot of copies. Despite being part of a niche genre and lacking any the advantages that *Crusader Kings II* enjoyed, *Europa Universalis IV* was a massi commercial success and saw almost the exact same growth trajectory as its flas medieval counterpart. And—perhaps even more crucially for the suits in Stockholm—the lack of depth didn't cause players to become any less engaged. The game's popularity only grew as time passed, with average concurrent playe numbers increasing year by year after its release in 2013. As for why, it's hard t dispute the Occam's razor explanation: simplicity sells. At the end of the day, *Europa Universalis IV*'s developers stepped away from the most complex and ambitious elements of the company's past titles, presented a near-fascistic view world history, and were rewarded with the most unambiguous commercial succ in the history of grand strategy gaming. With this in mind, the technology still

there yet for what *Victoria II* was trying to accomplish, and each future grand strategy release a major financial opportunity, what self-respecting grand strate company would do anything other than try to make things as accessible as possible?

The answer wasn't Paradox Interactive, which followed up a dumbed-down gar in *Europa Universalis IV* with an outright lobotomized one in 2016's *Hearts of Iro IV*. I'm fully willing to let my bias show here: I do not like *Hearts of Iron IV*. I cannot and have never been able to play it without mods because everything ab it repels me at a visceral level. While *Europa Universalis IV* erred too far on the s of simplification and did too little to represent internal conflicts, you can still t that its developers tried to do something with the resources available to them. Over the years, they'd make some attempts to implement internal politics into t game, with some degree of success by the very end of the game's development cycle. It never became a grand strategy enthusiast's dream game, but there was something there.

Hearts of Iron IV, by contrast, is a game for morons that has seemingly been designed by morons. Everything about it is an insult to the very idea of using computers to represent historical and social dynamics. Despite covering the shortest timespan of any Paradox game by far, *Hearts of Iron IV* is easily the leas detailed, least interactive, and least intricate strategy game produced by a majo studio in modern times. It doesn't even attempt to portray demographics, economics, or anything resembling internal politics. The only ideologies represented in the game are "Democracy," "Communism," "Fascism," and "Nor aligned"—whatever the fuck that even means—and changing between them is simple as clicking buttons on a screen and waiting. When one does so, the bigg impact it has is changing your flag and maybe your country color. One might presume that this is because the developers decided to focus more on the

wargaming side of a WWII game, but they didn't even do that! They designed it around letting the computer run the wars! And they haven't made it any better after nearly TEN YEARS of development!

Anyways. As you could probably guess, *Hearts of Iron IV* became a gargantuan financial success and hugely influential cultural artifact that absolutely lapped every other grand strategy game ever released by several orders of magnitude. T this day, it is a truly mainstream game, regularly within the top 30 concurrent players of any game on Steam on any given day. Leaving all else equal, if you we a young, politically engaged person in the past ten years, you very likely either played *Hearts of Iron IV* or engaged with *Hearts of Iron IV*-adjacent content. And the game interested you enough to engage with its other titles, you probably played *Europa Universalis IV*, which presented a similarly state-centric and war-focused view of history. Only the real freaks were dedicated enough to swing al the way back to *Victoria II*, which, by that point, was effectively being develope by 4chan—hardly a hotbed for productive politics.

For young Paradox fans during this period with left-wing politics—they did exi I was one of them—exposure to these kinds of game designs and discourses dic really change much about how we thought about the world. We were never goi to seriously consider a historical framework that understood states as homogenous entities and wrote off the importance of non-state actors, so we w able to easily (and correctly) conceptualize the depiction of history we saw in th games as intentional abstractions made for gameplay and/or commercial purpo While the games have had a real influence on left-wing political culture—one c actually map the resurgence of the Industrial Workers of the World this centur pretty cleanly onto the popularity of *Kaiserreich*, a *Hearts of Iron* mod that prominently features the union—it's very difficult to construct an argument tha they changed things about the way young left-wingers perceive the world. If th

did, we wouldn't have seen progressively-minded modders attempt to add inter complexity to the titles as soon as they learned how to use modding tools.

But among the young right-wingers who played the games, things were differer For as long as the modern American conservative movement had existed, right-wing historical pedagogy had been tightly controlled by the conservative establishment in its many varying forms. For some, this meant their local churc which raised them with a form of mainstream social conservatism. For later bloomers, this meant the campus arms of national right-wing organizations, th vast majority of which were built around promoting free market economics. In every case, these time-honored institutions provided the next generation of conservative leaders with a mainstream right-wing interpretation of history, wherein the heroes of human progress were capitalist entrepreneurs moored by traditional values and strong Western institutions. Standing as the villain in eve instance was Big Government, the common thread of the Puritans, the Nazis, Barack Obama, and every other oppressive and inefficient force to ever plague humanity. From the pimply-faced Goldwater teens of the 1960s to Turning Poir USA in the 2010s, nearly every aspiring right-winger in the country went down this exact pipeline and was told this exact story.

Paradox's post-*Crusader Kings II* titles took this pipeline, broke it, shattered it in tiny little pieces, dumped those pieces in the garbage and set the trash can on f As churches lost their influence in an increasingly secular world, the games got politically interested young right-wingers far earlier than any of the conservativ movement's institutions, told them a story that was far more compelling than anything the powers that be had to offer, and reached the heights of their popularity during a moment when the right at large was profoundly struggling figure out what it actually believed in. Instead of a strong, ideologically coherer leader, the right of the late 2010s had Donald Trump, a failing president who

hardly seemed to know what he even believed in himself. In the face of all of th teenage right-wing losers looked inwards and found direction in their greatest passion: spending thousands of hours pretending to be Adolf Hitler in a game t presented him as just another strong world leader.

When the traditionally-structured right-wing youth groups finally came into contact with this generation as they entered their college years, they hardly sto a chance. Take, for instance, the tragedy of Charlie Kirk, the leading light of th last pre-Paradox generation of young right wingers. Everything about Kirk's ea career followed traditional right-wing historical pedagogy to an almost comica degree. As he put it himself, his political awakening came from when he read Milton Friedman—yes, seriously—as a middle schooler. His political interests were identical to the issues page of the Romney/Ryan campaign: free markets, limited government, and everything else that your local neighborhood Koch Br group says is the most important thing in the world. Not only did he refrain fro the out-and-out culture warring that later defined his career, but he went as far to say that Christian conservatives had made a mistake in previous decades by trying to "impose [their] beliefs through government policy" on the rest of the public. His was a secular, "principled" conservatism, à la Barry Goldwater or Reddit's view of Ron Paul.

It probably goes without saying that boomer conservatives absolutely loved thi and gave him millions at a young age to get his organization off the ground. It a didn't do all that badly among other conservatives his age, who kept his organization growing at a fast pace throughout the 2010s. It was only after he t to evangelize his brand of mainstream politics to the Paradox generation in the late 2010s that he suddenly hit a brick wall. Here, the big flashpoint came in th fall of 2019, when Kirk was going through with one of his annual national camp tours. By that point, a series of personal slights had drawn him the ire of a 21-

year-old white nationalist streamer by the name of Nick Fuentes, who called fo other neo-Nazis around the country to brigade Kirk's events and attack the idea that free marketeering was the heart of rightism. Incredibly, this demand for a personal army actually worked. From college campus to college campus, Kirk a his co-speakers were met with harassment from college-aged neo-Nazis (also known as "groypers") who heckled him so loudly that he was forced to call an e end to an event with the President's son at UCLA.

Clearly, the rightist college students of the late 2010s were not nearly as recepti to Kirk's bread-and-butter "Big Government Sucks" message as the millennials had preached to at the start of his career. As for why, we may never know. Perh Trump's success had emboldened them into becoming more radical. Perhaps th fact that they had experienced the market failures of the Great Recession prior committing to an ideology made them less enthusiastic for Friedmanite doctrir than Kirk was. Maybe their own narratives about themselves were true, and the were simply expressing a pure version of right-wing thought undiluted by the prerogatives of the Con Inc. donor class.

Or perhaps they had simply spent so many thousands and thousands of hours playing as a singular, homogeneic, culturally coherent Big Government that the just couldn't imagine a world, or a right, without one.

In the six years that followed what would later be termed the "First Groyper W young, *Hearts of Iron IV*-addled neo-Nazis would turn out to be far from the onl part of the right that needed a new worldview for the Trump era. They had just been the first ones to find one. Rather than employ his famous debating skills against the student interlopers who said that conservatism was more than just opposing big government during his college swing, Charlie Kirk seemingly

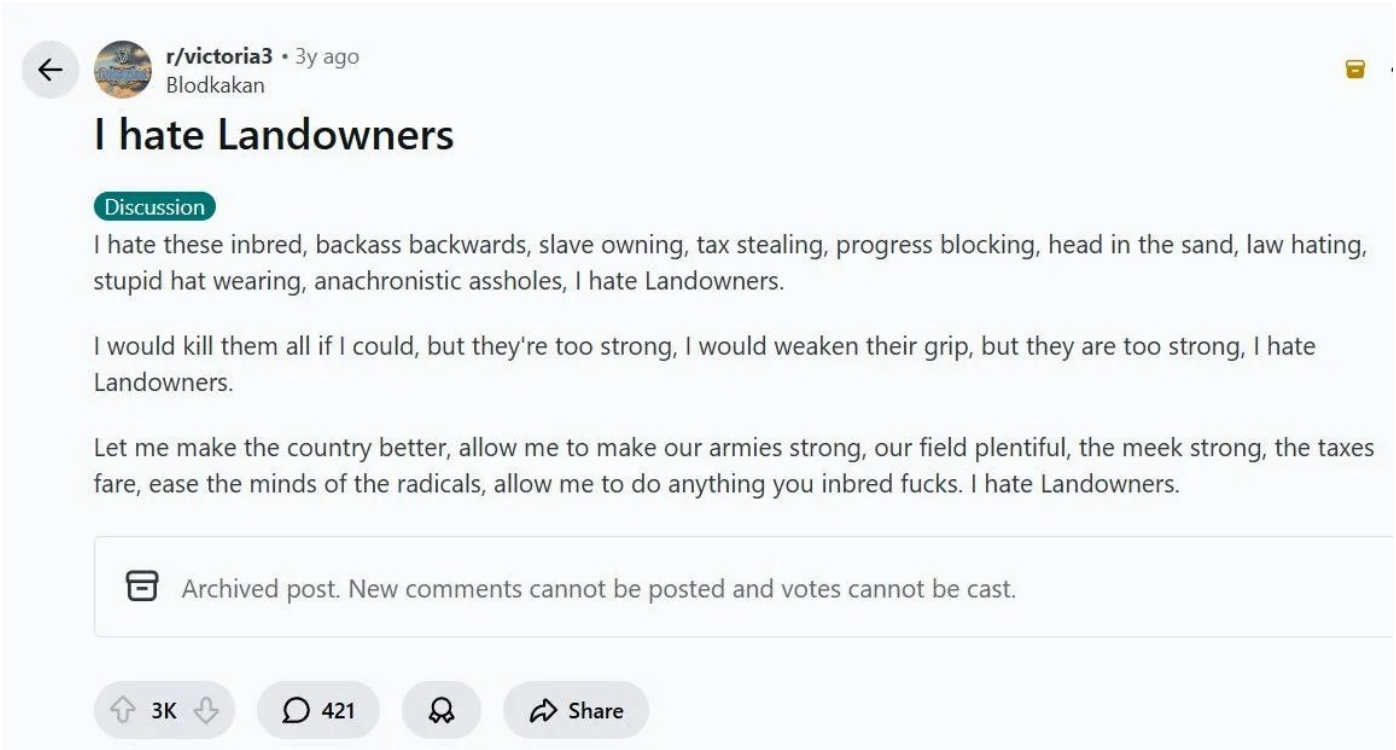
decided that they were right. Around 2020, right in aftermath of Fuentes's successful crashing of his 2019 tour, the TPUSA head abruptly veered hard in tl direction of the cultural war, connecting with big-name evangelical preachers a endorsing dominionist principles. The rest of his millenial-aged peers soon followed, with some of them even lapping Charlie himself in their newfound dedication to centuries-old causes.

It was also in this same year that then-*Fox and Friends* host Pete Hegseth went i a tattoo parlor and asked someone to ink him up with a reference to a video gar from 2012. He may have been decades older than the average grand strategy gar and almost certainly never heard of their favorite games, but he was just as mov as they were by the particular vision of history that Paradox depicted in their titles. He was so moved, in fact, that he made it the final two words of one of hi books and still insisted on keeping it on his body even after it caused a fellow officer to flag him as an "insider threat" in 2021. The indignity of being barred from serving at a presidential inauguration seemed to be a small price to pay fo him to give a reference that nobody would have understood ten years before.

Now, what became of Paradox Interactive? If you asked an old school and/or nc rightist grand strategy gamer this question around 2020, you likely would have heard a very pessimistic answer. By that point, the company had completely abandoned its old, innovative approach and had been financially rewarded for i beyond its wildest dreams. Around this time, it was common to hear bitter joke in the community that the next *Victoria* title would see pops replaced with anot "mana" system that would remove any and all of the internal mechanics that ma the second title in the series so singularly fascinating. But Paradox, as it often h would subvert expectations. After marking 2020 with *Crusader Kings III*, a long-awaited and well-received sequel that retained the core mechanics of its predecessor, they did a complete about-face in 2022 with *Victoria 3.* Contrary to

expectations, the title greatly expanded its predecessor's much-lauded pop syst
Not only did it have a deeply intricate system of internal politics that cast state
complex, multifaceted entities, but it was designed in a way that made its inter
mechanics close to the only thing one engaged with. Not only was war far from
the sole end what players did, but wargaming was all but removed as a mechani
entirely. Instead of fighting other countries, cultures, and religions, the average
Victoria 3 game consists of struggles against the reactionary elements within or
own society.

The result has been a community defined [by posts like this]():


r/victoria3 • 3y ago
Blodkakan
I hate Landowners
Discussion
I hate these inbred, backass backwards, slave owning, tax stealing, progress blocking, head in the sand, law hating, stupid hat wearing, anachronistic assholes, I hate Landowners.
I would kill them all if I could, but they're too strong, I would weaken their grip, but they are too strong, I hate Landowners.
Let me make the country better, allow me to make our armies strong, our field plentiful, the meek strong, the taxes fare, ease the minds of the radicals, allow me to do anything you inbred fucks. I hate Landowners.
Archived post. New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast.
3K
421
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It's worth acknowledging that none of this has been smooth sailing. While *Vict*
3 may depict history in a far more accurate and informative way than *Hearts of I*
IV, this hasn't meant that it has been more popular. Despite being a far more
recent game, *Victoria 3* has never come close to matching Paradox's Hitler-then
golden goose in players; as of today, it regularly sees only about 1/6th of *Hearts*

Iron IV's player count. But despite this, the company has doubled down. When t company finally released its long-awaited sequel to *Europa Universalis IV* last month, it revealed its most complex game yet. Not only is mana gone, but a pop system has been imported in, providing players with systems of internal management that *Victoria II* could have only dreamed of. In *Europa Universalis V* things are set up in such a way that you actually dread wars, as real rulers did in real life. It somehow makes things like the invention of the printing press legitimately exciting gameplay. And unlike *Victoria III*, it's actually proven capa of retaining players. As of today, more than a month after its release, it is still retaining *Crusader Kings III* levels of popularity, which is quite strong.

For the people in Stockholm who have been here for the duration of this long a improbable journey, it might seem as if everything worked out. Twenty years ag they got the rare kind of management that let them actually experiment, and th experimented their way into creating an entirely new market of their own. They then optimized their way into making as much money as possible for a few year before using that money to get back to work at creating the kind of game they always wanted to play. After gradually getting closer and closer, they're now, aft so many decades, on the cusp. Not only might that long-awaited Ultimate Gran Strategy Game finally be within reach, but it might actually be profitable—and might even provide the politically engaged youth of Gen Alpha with an actually useful view of human history.

The rest of us will just have to hope that we'll be able to survive the history that they've made.

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Comments Restacks

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Peter L Peter L 2d

Liked by ettingermentum

It shouldn't come as a suprise that the game in which you can spend hours designing panzer div but doesn't put an iota of effort into acknowledging the holocaust might bring about a skewed perspective.

LIKE (36) REPLY

3 replies by ettingermentum and others

MaironHWH 2d

Liked by ettingermentum

One thing I've noticed as a leftist active in online PDOX communities (even the forums!) is how n what you take for granted, both in views of how the world works and actual verifiable historical f and events, simply aren't perceived as such by a large and vocal section of the user base becaus only source is earlier games.

The example that always springs to mind is how many people seem to genuinely believe that the Ottoman Empire, an incredibly efficient and ahead of its time multicultural administrative state, v decadent corrupt rickety structure purely because when PDOX put them in game they had to ad limiters and the historical system of governance and internal politics/ethnic management wasn't possible within the systems, so the made the most Orientalist internal mechanic imaginable and when they try to move away from that in EU5 a large group of people lose their minds because t think its Paradox surrendering to fake historical lies and not actually trying to represent somethir properly that was wrong before.

LIKE (24) REPLY

4 replies

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